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Mass media served up in savage images

They may say they hate the mass media, but Oh, how artists long for its power!

For the most part, the Washington Project for the Art's exhibition titled "The Magazine Stand: Photography, Design, Video, Painting and Installations on the Subject of Mass Media," reveals more about the artists whose work is on view than it does about the media.

Focusing primarily on the work of eight artists and a cable TV production group, the show, curated by the WPA's Don Russell, is billed as an exploration of print media imagery. It is an interesting idea, but unfortunately "The Magazine Stand" seems curatorially unbalanced, as if it started out as one kind of exhibition and became another along the way.

Split between artists such as Richard Prince, Sarah Charlesworth and Paul Berger, whose approach to media imagery is distanced and ironic, and those like Martha Rosler, Barbara Kruger and Johanna Vogelsohn, who use media techniques as weapons for attack, the show founders on its own premise. It is dominated by artists whose aim is not analysis but blatant appropriation of mass media techniques for political ends.

Certainly art and the media is a trendy subject. Last fall at a conference in downstate Virginia titled "Media: Artists, Imagery & Influences," such New York pundits as critic Donald Kuspit and critic/artist Thomas Lawson argued whether cryptic symbolism or direct confrontation was the best way to resist mass media's wholesale "soiling of the unconscious."

Few of the WPA artists even attempt resistance. In the Warholian hope that total submersion is the truest form of protest, Mr. Prince photographically copies portions of color photographs from magazine ads, creates series according to subject matter, and exhibits the pictures as his own work.



Mr. Prince's best publicized stunt was his pirating of a nude photograph of actress Brooke Shields taken when she was 10 years old. He says he did it for the purpose of calling into question the ownership of images. This pathetic ruse in the grand scramble for five minutes of fame is memorialized at the WPA by a blowup of the picture in question laid out on one of the odd post-modern Italian tables and chairs, which the gallery has borrowed from Uzzolo to dress up the visual desert these artists have created. It is a tasteless homage to a tasteless act. Miss Charlesworth, another New York artist, is more inventive in her exploration of

media images. She has traced an eclipse of the sun through successive photographs of the event on the front pages of 30 local newspapers. Blanking out everything but the eclipse photographs and the masthead, she has documented not only a real-life event, but also the design idiosyncrasies and editorial approaches of small- and large-town presses from Seattle, Wash., to Thunder Bay, Canada. Titled "Eclipse (A Science Fiction)," Miss Charlesworth's piece is enjoyable, if slight.

The show really comes to life, however, with Barbara Kruger's aggressive feminist attacks on the soft underbelly of male power. A former designer for Conde Nast publications, she knows how to convey violence with relatively

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innocent images, how to unleash anger without losing her cool, how to arouse interest but withhold information until the viewer is hooked.

By pasting cut-out words from newspapers or magazines on photographic images from the mass media, this New York artist creates instant slogans — short declarative sentences using “we” and “you” which involve the viewer in sweeping generalizations. “You rule by pathetic display,” “Your manias become science,” and so on. The finished work is a framed photograph of the collage.

However, like the advertisements they ape, most of Miss Kruger's assaultive collages do not sustain attention for very long.

Even the subtleties of placement are good for only a few minutes' viewing. Then one “gets” it and moves on. Perhaps that is all the time an artist has to reach a larger audience in this media age, but it is short rations for someone

used to more nourishing fare.

Where Miss Kruger is adept at cut and thrust, Miss Vogelsohn, one of two Washington artists included in the show, believes in the bludgeon. For the most part, her collaged clippings about various outrages in Vietnam, in Central America, in Nazi Germany and here at home are more moving than the yellowish striated human remnants who inhabit her canvases. Certainly the presence of the clippings is the only possible excuse for including her work in the exhibition.

The most problematic work in the show, though, is Martha Rosler's hour-long videotape about torture. Beginning with a reading of a rather appalling Newsweek guest editorial proposing the use of torture in cases where the extraction of information might save lives, Miss Rosler launches into a violent attack on the United States and the CIA, which she accuses of exporting torture techniques all over the world.

There is no analysis here, just a media blitz. Words flash across the screen over an image of a hand piling up clippings from the New York Times while an unidentified female voice recites narratives about CIA atrocities. Incorporat-

ing all the worst practices of irresponsible media manipulation of facts, Miss Rosler's tape is pure propaganda, not art.

One is more than enough, but there is another video tape by Miss Rosler included as one of the segments from “Paper Tiger,” a New York cable television program which “analyzes” current magazines and newspapers. Vogue magazine is her subject and she juxtaposes photographs of models in furs with videotapes of workers in some unidentified oriental sweatshop, apparently slaving to create the clothes that Vogue sells to the rich and powerful.

What is the point here? A thoughtful show about the relationship of art to the print media would have been welcome. An exploration of contemporary political art might also have been interesting. But what we are given is a show about media which slips into crude political rhetoric as if the ostensible subject were only an excuse for the inclusion of works indefensible on any grounds.

“The Magazine Stand,” will be on view through June 30.